

Empowering the Idiom: A Survey of Twentieth Century Women's Poetry

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Abstract

Marginalized as another to Man, women fights at every step to achieve equal status and position. Like other socio-cultural institutions and practices, literature too became centre of this battlefield. In this clash of ideas, man the patriarch, constructed a literary tradition that preserved and appropriated masculinity as the norm in literary endeavour. And it has been the prime motive & critical concern of women writers & Theoritians to challenge & change this established androcentric tradition. Since, its inception female writers have had adopted subversive ways to alter this for an exclusively female one. Critical queries conducted in this connection, by Blau Duplessis, Judith Kegan, etc appreciate various thematic & stylistic strategies adopted across cultures by women. This paper attempts to fathom out the strategic shifts and innovative techniques that characterize the female aesthetic in the Twentieth century. In addition the peculiar use of idiom by modern writers is analysed as a device & shift in semiotics to attain desired subversive effects.

Key Words:-Masculinity, Female Identity, Oppression, Marginalized

Gender has had a significant impact in shaping human experience. Like other cultural practices, literature too preserved the gender difference and also helped to percolate it along socio-historical contexts. The foundations of a literary tradition that pioneered this difference and preserved its androcentric attitudes, were laid down in antiquity by past masters of the arts-Homer, Virgil, Aeschylus, Sophocles. In the guise of recording human experience of universal significance, they thematised masculine myth and patriarchal influence, making literary history to embody 'his story'. With its biased thematics and technical nuances, the tradition precipitated apparent marginality for the women writers. Besides, it couldn't go well with the innate creative potential of a female writer.

As a result, women writers got preoccupied in developing either a unique or an altered subversive tradition of their own. As against the universal thinking, women started their creative endeavours embodying their peculiar way of experiencing that was too distinct from their male counterparts. A different and distinctive literary tradition got pioneered that ran parallel to the recognised masculine one. The beginnings of this marginalized tradition, to which Veronica Forrest-Thompson calls 'The Tradition of Innovation', were initiated by Sappho and her contemporaries during classical times. Instead of recording human experience of 'universal essence' their poetry embodies pain and problems of the female race.

This retreat from the cosmic vision and delineating their personal experience was the very first strategic move to counter patriarchal literary tradition. Among these pioneering voices, Sappho became a cult figure for her reactionary poetics concerning intriguing themes about female experience and sexuality. In this connection, Gordermer comments that her poetry celebrates "an erotics of reciprocity and mutuality that stands in stark contrast to other archaic poets' themes of

masculine pursuits.” Though this subservient tradition had a significant influence on trans-historical and trans-national boundaries, but it couldn’t thrive under the influence of main masculine tradition.

English like other European cultures, too took Greece as its principal source of inspiration during old and medieval times. Its literary tradition got established under the twin influences of Greco-Roman paganism and Christianity. These influences with their misogynistic and phallogocentric attitudes and evangelical beliefs helped to shape the British literary tradition on androcentric assumptions. This tradition was enriched when Renaissance England privileged and embraced the classical masculine poets and their canonical texts, as literary models. These models with their pagan mythology appropriated gender difference as natural and universal. Thus a tradition with pro-masculine agenda, got established and it helped to nourish masculine stalwarts from Shakespeare through Milton and Donne to Wordsworth. Taking Helen, Pandora and Aphrodite as archetypal images of female beauty, they set the trends of a love poetry that relegated women’s body to an objective image by acting out “disempowering effect of the male gaze.”

Britishwomen, like their Greek ancestors had to struggle against this male centered poetics. However, owing to unfavourable socio-cultural circumstances and religious beliefs, women voices remained negotiable till the end of sixteenth century. Amidst all the obstacles woman’s poetry witnessed gentle but continuous flourishing throughout these ages. In the Sixteenth century beginnings were initiated by voices like Diana Primrose, Marry Wroth, Marry Sidney, Anne Gordon, Katherine Philips, Cavendish Sisters and Aemilia Lanyer etc. who got engaged in strengthening British female tradition. These writers paved the way for female poets like Katherine Philips, Aphra Ben, Anne Seaword, Anne Kilgrew, Charlotte Smith and Jean Adams to register their subdued voices.

At the turn of nineteenth century favourable socio-cultural changes against patriarchal conventions and evangelical proprietary unleashed female assertiveness. As a result a galaxy of female writers: Felicia Hemans, L. E. L, Eliza Cook, Adelaide Anne Proctor, Bronte Sisters, and Emily Peffer etc. hit the literary horizons of England. Though labelled as pre-imitators of Victorian triumvirate by Elaine Showalter, they struggled to achieve an authentic female voice. While articulating the plight of a woman writer caught in the conflict of her body, art, vocation and gender, they expressed a specifically female aesthetics through a radically poetic self. This aesthetics won a critical recognition in works of late Victorians, especially Elizabeth Barrette Browning and Rosettes. Browning’s *Aurora Leigh*, ‘Sonnets from the Portugees’ etc. and Rossetee’s ‘Goblin Market’ which are overtly politico-feminist in nature, are representative poems of this age. These voices were seconded by Emily Dickenson who pioneered a new female poetry in the American context. By establishing and strengthening the female literary tradition, she was later to nourish female intellect throughout the globe. An original writer, she experimented with new metrical and linguistic forms to attempt a new poetry that was not only gendered but, exclusively concerning with feminine identity.

However, in the beginning of the Twentieth Century women’s voices gained visibility owing to socio-cultural changes that resulted in social convulsion of Europe. Industrialism, European Imperialism, Commerce etc. across Europe, had a direct bearing upon women's socio-economic and artistic life. Literally these changes ushered “A Room of One's Own” to every woman and giving a free space and a promising status to them in public domain. Besides, it unleashed women's colossal labour force pent up with vehement entrepreneurship energies. As a

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result, women took the reigns of publishing houses which in turn lend power and visibility to the female voices. Amy Lowell, Mina Loy, Lola Ridge, Alice Anderson, Harriet Monroe and others not only wrote verse, but also entrusted themselves with the task of publishing, editing, co-editing periodicals and anthologies, that helped in preserving and promoting female literary endeavours.

Under the influence of modernist movement women writers too got pre-occupied with gender concerns and as such attempted unprecedented techniques and styles to articulate gender related issues. The women writers, who initiated female writing in modernist vein, were Nancy Cunard, Winfred Ellermen, Edith Sitwell, Eliza Bogan, George Dogles, Mac Cowdry, Anne Spencer, Angelina Grimke, Helene Johnson, Lola Ridge, Vincet Millay, Mena Loy and others. They earned an international repute and were influential in establishing modern women literary tradition. Though, in beginning of their career they exercised their hand on traditional topoi like romance, love, pastoral and cosmopolitanism, but they were sharp enough to pulse the androcentric bias, these themes embody and serve implicitly. In their mature works like Sitwell's 'Facade' and 'Still Falls The Rain' and Lola Ridge's 'The Ghetto and Other Poems' they took to a distinctive poetry replete with implicit and explicit feministic concerns. Their poetry makes an effort to expose the troubled womanhood and "caged bird" existence, their race was doomed to live under the banner of "woman for hearth and man for the field". To achieve this, they consciously resorted to the frequent use of suggestive symbols and arresting images drawn peculiarly from their domestic arena. These images and symbols especially windows, houses, birds, cages and quilts, used with reference to female gender, took a cumulative significance in their poetic context.

In an attempt to create a woman centred poetry, Millay and Loy took radical departures in their themes and poetic forms. Their works assume significance as they strongly advocated a female experience, though in conventional ways. It is for this quality of poetising female body, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, feel Millay and Marianne Moore, connected in their attempt, "to translate handicap of femininity into an aesthetic advantage." Both Loy and Millay, found traditional myths and motifs replete with androcentric assumptions. As such Loy employs ironic reversal of these themes and myths. In her famous poems "I Being Born a Woman" and "Daphne" she tackles the carpediem theme in a way that suits her to undermine the hierarchies prevalent in these myths. By employing a candid idiom and a distinctive syntax these writers achieved a linguistic ingenuity that sets them free although in their literary endeavours. Celebrating this hard won freedom, both in artistic and socio-sexual spheres, Millay employs the famous image of candle in, 'First Fig':

My candle burns at both ends;

It will not last the night; but ah, my foes, and oh my friends-

It gives a lovely light!

The use of different exclamatory marks for different genders reveals the potential force of her verse in liberating her race at literal and metaphorical level.

This rising power of female writing didn't go well with modernist voices like Eliot, Pound, Rilke, Yeats, Ransom and others. This new critical creed, With T.S. Eliot's "Waste Land" as its manifesto, favoured a retreat from a politically committed art. Instead of perceiving it as an outcome of scientific and experimental thinking, women writers took it as a deliberate attempt to

quell this rising creative power of women to which Marianne Deckoven describes 'fear of women's new power'. Suggesting about the effects of such an aesthetics, over female creativity, James Joyce writes, "Waste Land ended the idea of poetry for ladies".

Despite its inherent limitations this modernist male aesthetic fostered a desire among the female authors for a new female aesthetics. This need for female Avant-garde was already perceived by Mena Loy in her polemical essay "The Feminist Manifesto". She argues "there is no half-measure, No-scratching on the surface of the rubbish heap of tradition will bring about reform, the only method is Absolute demolition". Loy's plea for an exclusively female aesthetics was manifested in the works of Charlotte Mew, Edith Sitwell, Stieve Smith, Amy Lowell, HD, Gertrude Stein, Marian Moore and others. HD through her Imagist method and Moore through the essays "What Are Masterpieces" and 'Every Body's Autobiography' and Stein in 'Composition as Explanation' not only contributed but also confronted certain tenets of modernist aesthetics.

A close scrutiny of their poetic oeuvre reveals that to account for a distinguishable feminist writing, they shared certain common concerns. All these poets displayed a keen interest in investigating traditional poetic attitudes and gendered vocabulary, used by male authors in creating female stereotypes and thereby subverting female creativity. Most of their poems employ female characters, a different vocabulary and peculiar narratives to undermine the sexist ideology that pervaded the masculine canon. This female voice remains engaged in negating the gender stereotypes about woman's secondary and silenced lives created by the canon and envisaged by the recent Freudian psychology. This was achieved by rewriting myths and transforming symbols through redefining, rediscovering and reconstructing the female and feminine in the realms of beauty, myth and body. For instance HD in "Eurydice", "See Gods", and "Demetrius", Moore in "The Marriage" and "Roses Only", and Stein in her verse poem "The Patriarchal poetry" are consciously engaged in redefining the female ideal beauty, by making their female persona to embody both physical and intellectual strength, rather than, female delicacy.

Besides, the revisionist mythmaking strategy, emancipated women writers from the masculine language, which strangulated their creative potential. Describing this act as a significant shift; Olicia Ostriker calls it "as a means of exploring and attempting to transform the self and the culture. Myths are the sanctuaries of language where 'male' and 'female' are stored: to rewrite them from a female point of view is to discover new possibilities for meaning". A peculiarly women idiom began to emerge in their writings as these not only investigate but also present a critique of conventional poetic attitudes or vocabularies. To Montefiore the strength of women's poetry lies in the "struggle to transform inherited meanings". In this connection, HD and Stein became seminal for their work enacts this struggle not only in texture but also in language. For example HD in her famous poem 'Sea Rose' while revealing female sexuality treats the traditional symbol of femininity by resorting to a contradictory vocabulary:

Rose, harsh rose,

Marred and with stint of petals,

Meagre flower, thin

Sparse of leaf.

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Similarly, to rid language of redundancies and downplay the gender and sexist biases embedded in it, Moore and Stein played a seminal role. Both of them employed a vigorous language that cut across varied spheres of life. In his introduction to Stein's "Select Works" Eliot writes: "one of those few who have done the language some service". While enriching her feminine style with anti-male language, she counteracts Pound's linkage of scientific aesthetics to anti-feministic stance, by exploiting vocabulary drawn from science, engineering and technology.

Historically speaking, the post-holocaust period was a radically transforming age. Grappling with a bizarre reality in an intellectual age, women writers like their male counterparts, had not only to express existential questions but also articulate the concerns of their race within the gender confines of the Fifties, which Betty Friedan calls "feminine mystique". Thus women's poetry became varied, multi-dimensional and intellectual, responding to the diverse aspects of their lived experiences. Stifled by iconographies of poetess and as a reaction against the charge of effeminacy, writers like Elizabeth Bishop, Sonia Sanchez, Denise Levertov, Rukeyser and Mary Astel, to name a few, wrote distinctively as women writers, but within the realm of impersonality. Though labelled as intellectual poetry that commands technicality and eschews its linkage with any kind of gender and sexual concerns, but implicitly it portrays them outcast artists hell-bent to thwart sexual, ethical and ontological stifling pressures, which androcentrism uses to strangle their creative potential. Born as indomitable rebels they took to a poetry that was covertly feministic in origins. Mostly their poetry thematizes the exploitation met by their race at the hands of masculine structures. Rukeyser with her awakening call, 'I am that woman who too long/ Under the web lay' 'To wake/And to say my own name' in poem 'Long Enough' and Levertov's unique combination of artistic and personal self as against impersonality cult, were apocalyptic voices to shape the contemporary female tradition represented by Sexton, Plath, and Adrienne Rich.

On the other hand, a break-through poetry was also attempted by Plath and Sexton. As academic elite, these writers display a strong desire to thwart much approved rigid conventions and traditional structures. In their reactionary poetics against established tradition they changed the basic premise of man-women relationship.

In the wake of "the personal is political" they adopted the technique of self-narration that came as a sort of act to reveal their agonised individual feelings and collective experiences. The psychic and emotional trauma not only energized their poetic imagination, but also offered a language to explore their unconscious. Though Anne Sexton didn't achieve reputation as a feminist writer as did Plath, for she poetised her frenzied and abnormal life. In her early phase of career, Sexton employs a female persona that cherishes the prescribed role of a docile girl, but her mature poems ridicule the traditional markers like 'beauty' and 'passivity' that adore a woman throughout her life. In 'Snow White' she records:

Beauty is a simple passion
But, oh my friends, in the end
you will dance the fire dance in iron shoes

Towards her mature years, she wrote about mother-daughter relationship, breast feeding, abortion, menstruation, child birth. Her collections 'Love Poems' and 'Transformation', are about these unattended themes related to female sexuality. While attempting these hitherto tabooed

themes, she reveals the subjective female body as the source of colossal power and political change. Celebrating her femaleness, Sexton comments in her poem:

In celebration of the woman I am
And of the soul of the woman I am
And of the central creature and its delight
I sing for you, I dare to live.

In order to convey her sense of femininity, she plunges deep into her feminine self that provides her with the suitable tropes to do away with conventional language and poetic techniques. The deep recesses of her inner being provided her apt images and figures of speech to articulate unexpressed experiences of her race. By employing peculiar technical devices as a substitute to conventional poetic forms, she manipulates her own poetic form that she thinks, 'is a trick in order to get at the truth.'

However, at an early age Plath weaves her feminist stance with confessional poetics. Plath achieves her goal by employing a female persona who metamorphoses from a docile girl with niceties of womanhood to a rebel who leaves conventionality to celebrate her female identity. In "Collosum" and "Crossing Water". She employs a speaking persona subservient to the tyrannical and authoritative institutions of marriage and domesticity. This voice that remains hostage to prowess of male heroes, dramatizes the female victimization that ranges from sexual one to the ways like staring, blyng etc. This victimisation precipitates doom, despair, and anxiety. To come out of the trappings of these institutions this voice perceives isolation and alienation, as a means to put up some kind of resistance. However, in her mature poetry this voice is endowed with an anger that Susan Gubar believes, "is not a distortion or weakness of their sex, but showing their character as authors double, an image of her own anxiety and rage. It is through the violence of the double that female author enacts her own raging desire to escape male houses and male texts." However, the speaking voice becomes vitalic and energetic in "Applicant", "Dady", and "Lady Lazzarus" to destroy all protective subterfuges of conventional femininity. Making her lyric voice as a plenitude and a positive source of multiple physical and social potentialities, Plath becomes the first female writer to fathom out her body as the source of her poetry. And this was to lay the foundation of Eriecture feminine in the second half of the twentieth century. Her poetry is not only thematically radical but technically innovative. To reveal her oppressions and problems, she is beset with as a female writer, she resorts to appropriate myths to achieve impersonality. Her poetry is marked by a new poetic medium, ironic verbal patterns and descriptive accuracy. She resorts to repetitive incantatory rhythms, colloquial styles and economic use of image. By embodying her lyric rage in a twisted and banal tone, she achieves the status of a trendsetter for radicalizing the notion of female hood, among cohorts of feminism.

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